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TO FEEL BETTER

Savannah Woods

My tongue latched to the roof of my mouth. My throat muscles worked in protest. No, no, no. I closed my eyes and tried to think of anything but the nine orange tabs of hell in my palm. I had to do this. In the soft light of my dorm room, I watched myself in my scratched, refracted mirror. She wasn't me—*no, no, no*—but my jaw clenched like I was about to down something foul, piss-soaked, rotten. Possessed, I threw the sweet pills onto my dry tongue, swallowed, swallowed the last one that caught in the back of my throat, gagged and shuddered. I grabbed my Hydro Flask but my stomach was so swollen that anything more than a baby sip threatened to rip me open.

Dulcolax pills are roughly the size and shape of dried arborio rice. The trick is to swallow eight or ten of them so fast the sweet orange coating doesn't dissolve and make you gag. It's better with water, but sometimes that's a luxury I didn't ration for. On the label of Dulcolax, it specifies use "for temporary relief of occasional constipation and irregularity" and it "produces bowel movement in 6 to 12 hours." The main ingredient, bisacodyl, is known as a stimulant laxative. This means it's bad for your body.

The sweet, sickly taste of the pills persisted; it repulsed me. I quickly dug under my bed for something to make my mouth more palatable. The plastic wrappers of sugar-free mints, LifeSavers, and cinnamon Trident gum sifted through my fingers. My earlier promise to not binge and purge had left me empty of my coping calories—sometimes if I didn't have supplies to fall back on, I didn't do it. I found one piece of old, dusty gum, brushed off the dirt, and crammed the stick in.

I looked outside, wringing my hands. Winter held Missoula with icy breath. Below, the parking lot was covered in snow and ice, and the trees looked like black spider legs. It was too cold to walk. My fingers rubbed my collarbones as the sweetness continued to nettle my sanity. Maybe I had accidentally thrown some wrapped mints in the trash.

There is no way to pleasantly or politely describe laxative abuse. It hurts. It's gross. And it's humiliating. Nights become brutal, throat-choking, bitter, stinky nightmares. You lay in your bed and you fart rancid, horrible, bowel-crushing farts and you think *is the feeling of thinness really worth it?* For months on end, I'd jolt awake to cramps, urges, and a gurgling under the bottom of my left ribs. I held my breath when the cramps paralyzed me. Groggy and half blind, I waddled and hunched and sometimes crawled my way to the bathroom, sat on the toilet, and hoped

that none of my residents would stumble in on their RA shitting her brains out. “Food poisoning,” I planned to explain to them if I was caught. “Something I ate,” or “I’m never having the chicken strips again.”

I got down on my knees. The trash was wet. I’d dumped coffee and juice over my leftover binge food: a ham sandwich, two chewed and spit-out chocolate bars, one half-eaten bran muffin, a full salami panini, the cores of two apples, a mashed banana, and the crumbles of a giant, size-of-my-head chocolate chip cookie. It smelled sugary and warm and gross. Normally, I tossed hair from my hairbrush and swept my floor to throw dust on it. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, I’d just dig through it until I found a clean enough piece and continue gnawing.

I stared at the mush and wetness, breathed in the fumes. The urge to eat filled my every nerve. I knew if I stuck my hand down there, my self-respect and decency would disintegrate with the crumbly feel of warm chocolate. I shot up, undid the trash bag and sprinted to the 9th floor trash chute. I felt bad throwing it down—residents on the lower floors complained—but nothing else would truly stop me.

I curled up on my black futon, thinking about what I could do. I finished my Dulcolax bottle and I needed more mints. My dependency on the pills had been gradual; I’d been using them every few days by sophomore year. Now, by the beginning of spring semester, I was going through a 200-pill bottle every two weeks. On nights the bottle was empty, I walked to the 24-hour Albertsons across the frozen Clark Fork River. Walking burned calories, and when I went at night the soft lights of the bridge and chilly air reminded me of good times.

Tonight though, I couldn’t muster up the energy. As I lay huge and full of loathing, I remembered I kept my medicine basket under my futon. I took out the Tums and chewed 7 antacids. They weren’t as tasty or sharp as the mints or gum, but they filled my mouth with chalky sweetness that masked the pills’ rancid leftovers. I drifted off to sleep, trying to adjust so my stomach didn’t hurt.

Nobody told me that the tendency to starve—but not starve too much—and to binge—but not binge too much—and to purge—but not purge too much—was severe enough. I thought I wasn’t good enough for true anorexia or bulimia; I wasn’t controlling enough, serious enough. At this point, I didn’t know how to throw up (though I’d tried on numerous occasions), so I logically did the next best thing. I knew that laxatives didn’t undo my binges, but they made me feel better. I’d programmed my mind to associate anger with wanting food, with hunger as some terrible admission that I had a body with human needs. I never lost massive amounts of weight, and I didn’t gain large amounts either. I labored to self-improve by destroying my body. The more I ate, the more I needed to compensate. The longer I fasted, the more I loved myself. I would look at the pictures of emaciated

women and think, “I’d like to have anorexia, but not like her.” Something about those skinny, bony, horrifying-looking women both scared me and infuriated me. That was *too* skinny, too scary, too sick—why couldn’t I have *half* the discipline as her, why couldn’t I just starve and starve and starve until I got “okay” skinny? The skinny that looked healthy. My weight floated within an unnoticeable twenty pounds, but those twenty pounds sagged on my self-esteem. *How fucking unacceptable*, I thought. I wasn’t good enough; I wasn’t valid; I *sucked*. I lived in a world where neither spectrum accepted me, and I felt if only, if only I fit the diagnosis for one or the other then I could seek help. If only I was fucked up enough, someone could cure me.

I woke several hours later to rolling, searing cramps. The back of my neck and behind my ears broke into a sweat. The slogan on Dulcolax is “Gentle, dependable constipation relief,” and if that isn’t the fattest lie in the advertising industry, I don’t know what is. Amazon reviewers claim that it’s “An Exorcism for the Stomach!!” or “Food poisoning couldn’t be worse,” or “Only a masochist would label this pill ‘gentle.’” The pain is unbearable, like freezing knives grabbing the ends of my intestines and trying to make them pirouette. But it got the job done: I felt thinner, empty, lighter. I was addicted to that feeling of being empty, weightless.

But something was wrong this time. The pain was there, but there was a sour, dry taste in the back of my throat. I burped. Tangy. And then I remembered: antacids are a bad mixture with Dulcolax. The bottle warns that one should avoid milk or antacids within an hour of taking them. Normally I had been fine. Nothing happened when I binged on ice cream and sugary cereal with milk right before. This time it felt different: more sour, more gut-wrenching, like improperly dissolved pills churning in acid, wet chemicals gurgling up my throat.

Panic set in. I rubbed my jaw and neck—it still felt the same. *Had I fucked myself up truly this time?* I burped an acidic burp. *Who could I call? Should I go into the emergency room? They would laugh at me.*

Mom wouldn’t laugh, but what happened over break was too recent. Going home to Helena had been a living nightmare. To remove myself from the temptation of food and bingeing, I left my wallet and walked the mile-and-a-half to Helena’s downtown. I distracted myself for hours in The Mercantile or Murry’s Café. “Savannah,” my sister complained, home from her first college semester at Westminster, “Why are you gone all the time? It’s not fun and it’s weird.” I couldn’t tell her the Honey Nut Cheerios dug daggers into my head, the forbidden cookies and pies sang to my sick mind. It was easier to remove myself, to physically lock myself away, hole up, cower. I couldn’t trust myself.

By Christmas Day, my head ached and my iron will had fractured and my legs were achy and cold from the miles I walked. I made it through lunch and dinner with “normal” portions, but my body raged for more. It was our celebratory Indian Christmas dinner, full of rare, delicious foods

that I craved. One more soft, salty, fried Indian *puri*. *Just one*, I thought, *when will I have puris again?* As my family and I took turns clearing the table and cleaning up, I grabbed another *puri*, snuck into the bathroom, and shoved it down my throat. It was dry and tasteless and horrible, but my stomach demanded the pain. It demanded fullness, because who knew how long it would be until I gave it food again. *Fill me, Savannah*, it seemed to ache. *Fill me, please*. Soon roll after roll went down, and I determined that this required another fast. This one would be seventy-two hours. Three days. Or maybe as long as I could go.

But the fried bread weighed like bricks in my stomach. Round, wet, doughy bricks. The feeling itched through me. I went to the basement and dug through my suitcase, hoping that I hadn't done what I'd thought I'd done and used the last of my stash. I had.

"I'm going to Walgreens," I said, clinging to my keys and walking swiftly to the kitchen door that led to the garage.

"Why?" my mother asked. Soft Christmas lights haloed her head. The soft murmurs of the TV in the living room supplemented my sister's laugh. "It's too snowy out there."

"I'm going," I said, hopping from one foot to the other. "I need to go."

I don't remember how she convinced me, but somehow I let my mother take me gently by my hand and sit me down at the kitchen table. My hands wrung tightly, fingers picking at my fat, and my legs trembled and I needed, needed to go get the thing that would make me feel better.

"Why," she pressured me, "Just why?" My mother has soft green eyes and she's the cutest, most happiest, most understanding person in my world. I knew I was hurting her, but my eating disorder always, always, always came first. Trying to fight against it was like swimming against a rip tide. Logically, I knew I was doing something bad, but I was too panicked and too tired and too blind and too anxious to see, let alone try, any other alternative. For the past few years, Mom had watched me try to swim harder, offering love and encouragement, but she couldn't do anything when the current yanked me back. I told her that I needed laxatives, right then, right now. She didn't blink. "You don't need them, Savannah, Christmas is a time for indulging. Everybody does it."

I begged, pleaded, vibrated. Not in the way I indulged, I tried to tell her. I was gluttonous, fat, unclean, my thighs puffing, fat growing and dimpling and protruding my stomach, and—*god*—I was so *ugly*. She gave in and drove me to Walgreens, speaking soft words of reason. The voice in my head shut her out. The parking lot was empty and blanketed with fresh snow. I got out and walked quickly ahead of her. Mom hung back, watching, almost as if she knew nothing could stop me. I felt ashamed purchasing laxatives, here, of all places, and at this time, so I grabbed a pink spiral journal to appear normal. The fluorescents hummed as I scanned the shelf for a generic brand of Dulcolax. The cashier rang up my purchases with the blank, haunted gaze of someone having to work on Christmas Day. I

couldn't speak to Mom on the way back; my heart hurt, and I cradled my purchases.

Mom's sad, green eyes were still too raw. No, I couldn't call her. Not at this time, not at this place. It came to me instantly. The bulletin on Brooks Street. "Community Medical Emergency Room," it said. "Nurse on Call. 24 hours." I don't know if it's still there. But I remembered it. I googled the number and called it, fingers gripping my hamstring tendons.

The nurse greeted me and asked me what was wrong. She didn't sound tired at two in the morning.

"I took laxatives with antacids. And my stomach hurts weirdly."

She asked me how many of each. I told her five and five. A more acceptable number.

"Why did you do that?"

Her question threw me off. I didn't have an answer. I just had to do it. "I don't know."

She asked again: "Why'd you do that?"

I didn't know what to say. My throat dried. Panic bubbled under my chest. I was more afraid of this woman knowing than I was of potentially damaging my stomach. I always knew how to hide my disorder, to hide the thousands of calories, to claim I'd forgotten to eat that day (and the day before that, and the day before that). I knew how to appear normal. But this was the first time a stranger had asked me: "Why do you do this?" *Why do you hurt yourself like this?* The brazen confrontation trapped me in my delusion.

Why did I do this? I knew it was stupid.

I asked, "Will I be okay?"

"Yes, I would think so. It's just a small reaction, but if the pain gets worse then you should go in. Do you know where St. Patrick's Hospital is?"

I quickly hung up. I paced. The urge seared my bowels and I went to the bathroom and felt better. On the toilet, I scrolled through my phone, bouncing my legs. My stomach felt less arid, less acidic. I knew I needed to start exercising the calories off; my legs were ready, but the task ahead of me loomed heavily. After ten minutes, I went to the west stairs of Jesse tower to begin. I settled on ten flights of stairs ten times. The air in the stairwell was cool, comforting. Outside, snow fell like falling stars in the orange lamplight.

I watched myself in the darkened windows. Step down, down, down. My dorm formed a right angle, and the stairs have windows facing inward. When I was on rounds with my RA duty partner, we used the windows to spy for parties: flashing lights, sardines of people, beer bottles on sills, an odd collection of fans facing outward. Now I wondered if those same residents could see me. Up and down like a crazed woman—hey, isn't that the RA?

Why did I do this to myself? I thought. My darkened form slid around corners, pausing ever so slightly to eye my baggy sweats and sweatshirt. It

hid my swollen body. I hit the bottom and raced back upward two steps at a time. My steps were labored and they echoed, and the stairwell became a plastic container that steamed with my overcooked breath.

I started crying on the fifth set, settling on the eleventh floor, out of breath and wanting to quit. *Crying burns calories*, I thought. Warm tears wet my face and hair, but my hands and nose were cold. I felt swollen with sadness and desperate to stop. But I couldn't quit. Something in me wouldn't let me. It was like a barrier: I knew it wasn't helping, I knew that I couldn't undo the calories, and I knew that laxatives would do nothing but make me feel better. Yet giving up felt like a nightmare worse than Dulcolax-flavored ice cream.

Only now can I retrospectively diagnose myself: I had "Another Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder," according to the new and improved 2013 *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition. But I didn't know that. And I still don't know why.

When I was young, my self-awareness of my body came gradually, forming a hypersensitivity to how I appeared and related to those around me. I didn't pursue any activities that put an overwhelming focus on my body. I quit ballet and tap dance long before I determined that bodies could be ugly and fat. I played basketball and volleyball for many years, and both sports encouraged a strong, healthy body. Yet, I can pinpoint the moment when I decided I was fat: I was eight, puffing out my baby tummy in the mirror. I didn't care that I could outrun my sister and play tackle football as well as my brother. I started to feel unhappy with the way I looked.

My eating disorder truly started after I left my student exchange in India. It was 2013, and I was seventeen and stuck in a room with four walls and no one to talk to. I craved home and some semblance of love, and I sought all-American peanut butter by the spoonfuls, spooning away my insecurity and the taste of weird vegetables and the feeling of being sedentary. All I wanted to do was run, walk, play ball. I ballooned up with puffy cheeks and thick thighs in a foreign country where everyone around me was stick-thin. When I came home, I looked at the knobby knees of my sister, the razor-thin shoulder blades of my brother, and then to the pouch of my stomach. *One of these does not belong*, I thought.

The idea that I could actually change my body came from my dad. "You can count calories," he said, "if you're unhappy with your body and you think you need to lose weight. But you don't need to lose weight, Savannah, you're beautiful as you are."

I didn't feel beautiful; at that moment, seventeen-year-old Savannah felt lumpy and uncoordinated and fat. My dad's advice was a revelation. I know he was trying to help me, but neither one of us could have predicted the change it would have on me.

I embarked on my first diet ever. I downloaded MyFitnessPal. I counted calories. I counted mouthfuls. I counted teaspoons and tablespoons and cups. As the calories went down, so did the scale, and I started to feel lighter. I rubbed my hands over legs that became slimmer, over collarbones that appeared, over the ribs that stuck out.

When calorie counting failed me a year later, I felt angry that I couldn't just starve. Calories of food lingered in my head; it was too dangerous to just eat a 70-calorie egg. Better to just not eat at all. Then I wouldn't have to count it. My body begged for food. I tried to restrict even more.

I knew how to make myself feel better. My fingers became red pens, my eyes laser-focused on my deformities. My legs morphed into some hideous extension of me, my fingers the merciless probe that deemed life was not worth living with them as is. They scoured every bump, every flabby hold, every cellulite dimple and my nails wrote red lines of failure on my skin like an author editing his book. *No. Not good enough. What does this mean? Fat, lumbering legs. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Weak.* On my collarbones they wrote, *not sharp enough, not hollow enough, not deep enough.* On my stomach they critiqued, *too bulky, must trim, get to the muscle underneath.* On themselves they scratched, *where are the tendons, where are the hollows, where is the emotion?* I felt nothing for my reflection; I hated her.

My sophomore year, my urges broke free and I spiraled into bingeing and purging. Yet my eating disorder wasn't about control. . . but it was. It was about feeling better. It was about feeling okay in my body. Feeling okay with how I appeared to the world. In February 2018, I woke up with my head in the trash can and my sick slipping down the sides and my eyes bulging and my face hot and sweaty to realize that half-hearted efforts to recover just weren't doing it. So, I thought, I could throw up now. Was I a true bulimic yet? Would this make me feel better? All of this was to make me feel better. . . So why didn't I?